Variations of Vampires

By Jonathan Olvera

It was different to grow into maturity as a young man in the Hungarian wilderness. Though it was not foreign land, it always felt otherworldly—the tall trees rising in dark cathedral arches, the rich earth damp with dew, and the clouds gathering thick and heavy as if they too belonged to the forest. The air was cool and moist, yet carried the promise of fire, smoke, and strange labor. Here, each season unfolded like a vast drama—winter's silence, spring's thaw, summer's thick green canopy, and autumn's burning leaves.

This was Hungary in the fourteenth century, a place of borderlands and rumor. In the clearings of the forests men worked constantly, cutting down timber for fire, for smelting, for the strange furnaces of iron and glass. Others tended the breeding of silk worms, weaving their cocoons into garments that traveled as far as Italy and Rome. These were textiles patterned and knotted for the civil branches of the Etruscans, the Byzantines, and the Italian courts. The noise of hammers, looms, and axes was constant, and yet, when evening fell, the wilderness reclaimed its silence. The forest spoke louder than men ever could.

And in that silence, stories spread. Tales of wolf-men, cursed by the ancient spirits of the land. Whispers of vampires, drinkers of human blood, prowling through villages and hunting beneath the moon. The peasants told of sacrifices, of midnight disappearances, of bodies drained and cast aside. Children listened wide-eyed around the fire, and the stories grew darker with every telling.

I was one of those children. And though I worked among the peasants—gathering vegetables, feeding pigs, washing in the rivers—I listened. I listened with fascination, and I carried those tales into my dreams. Later, I discovered that the diet of noblemen was not bread and broth alone, but something more sinister. It was whispered that among the Etruscans, among the Roman legacies that clung to our soil, men of power dined upon human blood, flesh, and even reptile, as though consuming strength from the marrow of creation itself.

The diet was not spoken of openly. It was a select feast, reserved for governors, judges, and officials—those who sought to make themselves stronger than the common man. A governor must feed upon more than meat, it was said; he must feed upon the very essence of another soul.

As a boy, I watched men. I observed how they ate, how they drank, how they fell sick and how they revived. I studied pigs and their strange cunning, cows and their slow gentleness, men and their poisons. And I began to see a pattern: the vampire was not merely a beast of the forest. He was a man who knew the secret of consumption—how to cut the skin, how to drink blood, how to take another's vitality into himself.

In time I turned these thoughts upon myself. My own teeth seemed different, sharpened as if made for more than bread and greens. My own diet shifted, not only vegetables, water, and milk, but meat—and with it came the knowledge, whispered in my dreams, that blood too was nourishment. It was a curse, perhaps, but also a secret. The curse was this: to fight another man and take his life, not for hatred but for strength. The secret was this: that blood bound men together, that the eater became like the eaten, stronger, wiser, stranger.

One autumn, as the leaves reddened and the forest darkened earlier each evening, I followed the mountain paths to a place spoken of only in hushed voices. It was a rocky trail, steep and cruel, leading to a stone keep set against the sky. The villagers called it Castle Transylvania. It stood high above the Hungarian forest, quarried from the very mountain it crowned, its towers clawing into the clouds. From a distance it seemed deserted, but I knew better. This was where the lords dwelt. This was where the stories were born.

Within its walls I was put to work. My duties were humble at first: boiling vegetables, cleaning pigs, scrubbing stone floors until my hands cracked. Yet even these small tasks were lessons. I was learning how to serve a master, how to prepare a table, how to make myself invisible when great men dined. And I watched. Always, I watched.

At night the castle transformed. Torches lined the hall, shadows stretched across vaulted ceilings, and nobles gathered to feast. The tables bore roasted boar, loaves of steaming bread, and flagons of red wine. But there was more, always more. I saw vessels brought in silence—bowls dark with blood, meat that seemed too pale, too human. I dared not ask. I dared not speak. But I knew.

The noblemen ate differently. Their faces flushed with unnatural health, their eyes glowed as if lit from within. They drank slowly, reverently, savoring each drop as though it were a prayer. I realized then that the stories of the peasants were not mere superstition. They were truths wrapped in legend, whispers of practices too dark to admit in daylight.

The Duke of Italy, Cosimo II, was rumored to have dined this way. Vlad, too—the boy they called Vlad II, whose name would one day echo through centuries—learned these secrets. It was not the impaling of enemies alone that gave him his power. It was the feast, the blood, the ancient rite that bound him to strength greater than mortal men.

And I—though still young, though still a servant—was beginning to feel the same hunger. In the dark halls of Castle Transylvania, amid the echoes of feasts and the scent of blood, I felt the curse stirring in my veins. I was not merely observing anymore. I was becoming.

The wilderness had raised me in silence, in labor, in the constant rhythm of survival. But the castle had awakened something else. A knowledge of blood. A knowledge of power. And though I still washed pigs, still boiled vegetables, still bent beneath the commands of my masters, in my heart I carried the secret flame.

I knew that one day, I would no longer serve at the table.
I would sit at it.
And when that day came, I too would taste the variations of vampires.